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Decommodified Labor: Conceptualizing Work After the Wage

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ABSTRACT A way to think labor after financialization, decommodified labor refers to an emptying out of the same wage relation that nonetheless continues to structure our lives. "Working hard or hardly working" needs a new conjunction: in an age of decommodified labor, one finds oneself working hard and hardly working. I suggest that decommodified labor offers cultural critics a form for isolating labor today that takes account of its relation to the wage, that may assist in periodizing the capital-labor relation, and that also highlights financial change alongside labor's durational necessity under capitalism.

"Payment is on an unpaid basis."—job posting¹

How do we think labor in our economic present? In an age of financialization, under the organization of what many commentators have explained as a FIRE (finance, insurance, real estate) economy, what are our metrics for, and what are our theoretical orientations of, conceptualizing labor? The past few years have seen the question of labor's contemporaneity appear in popular and theoretical discourse, presaging both its return from a biopolitics-based exile as well as its predicted eclipse by novel economic prognostications. We have witnessed new terms emerge, including, most prominently, "immaterial labor" as well as "affective labor." Fredric Jameson has suggested that we reread *Capital Volume 1* as a "theory of unemployment"—certainly an argument for rethinking the metrics of labor.² Yet historians have wondered whether we have witnessed "the rise and fall of the job" or whether many of us will live a "wageless life."³ To these academic discussions about labor's scope and breadth, we should add popular publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, which has not so subtly declared, "The End of Employees," and *Forbes* which wondered: "Unpaid Jobs: The New Normal?"⁴

On the occasion of this special—and necessary—issue of *Lateral* on rethinking Marxism, I would like to suggest a return to the question of labor and a certain configuration of labor in particular: what I call *decommodified labor*. A way to think labor that becomes available after financialization, *decommodified labor* refers to an emptying out of the same wage relation that nonetheless continues to structure our lives. "Working hard or hardly working" needs a new conjunction: in an age of decommodified labor, one finds oneself working hard *and* hardly working. I suggest that decommodified labor offers cultural critics a concept for isolating labor today that takes account of its relation to the wage, that may assist in periodizing our current capital-labor relation, and that highlights financial change alongside labor's durational necessity under capitalism.

Whether we classify it or not, we encounter decommodified labor daily. Reality television, for example, runs on decommodified labor: those "real" people we see on television forgo a wage in exchange for "exposure."⁵ It was recently reported that the corporate-hipster company Urban Outfitters asked its employees to "volunteer" for six-hour holiday shifts. Such volunteerism would be like work, but without the wage.⁶ In the popular HBO series

Girls, one character notes to another that he has taken “a new job as an assistant to a curator of dance. It’s unpaid, but it could lead somewhere.”⁷ Whether in cultural production, cultural consumption or in the content of various cultural texts, decommodified labor limns our present. We see further examples of decommodified labor in professional sports, civic maintenance, and throughout secondary education and the academy.

As with any “aesthetic-economical-historical”—which is to say, cultural—concept, decommodified labor is indexible but not reducible to an empirical reality.⁸ We have multiple and discrete data points to guide us. First, there has essentially been no real increase in real wages in the United States since 1970.⁹ We know from decades of sociological research that employment has become more service-oriented, low-wage and precarious; the most common job in the United States today is that of cashier.¹⁰ But at another level, bad work becomes no work. Thus we can further qualify not what but whether employment is generated in such a scene. The economic historian Aaron Ben-Ner notes that in “high income countries [by] 2010 more than 1 in 6 workers, and 1 in 4 young workers, counted as surplus to labor demands.”¹¹ And yet a concept cannot be produced through such data alone; facts must be distilled within a historical scheme in which their importance as fact and the hierarchical terrain in which empiricism might cede into abstraction may be organized and revealed.

To approach the emergence of the changes that render decommodified labor visible today is to return to the 1970s. It was then that a coordinated national and international effort led by the United States began to halt wage growth and offer, in its place, ever-expanding forms of ever-cheaper consumer credit. We now have a palate of debt-forms: medical debt, student debt, car debt, mortgages, and credit-card debt. Basic and necessary to social reproduction, often securitized and a now-staple of our financial system, such debt-forms emerge from the ashes of the Keynesian compact. In the United States, that compact insured that organized labor would get more of a share of social wealth in exchange for a less radical labor politics; that the US dollar would serve as the benchmark for international exchange and would be fixed to gold. The reasons for its demise are many and, for us, less important: as Keynes himself famously said of economic durability, “in the long run, we are all dead.”¹² In the short run, however, the 1970s would produce shifts in how work was represented, critiqued, and experienced. Union membership began its long decline. The economy began its first post-war stagnation, now reconceived as “stagflation.” Faced with the fall out from high inflation and high unemployment, Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker foresaw a new path: the Federal Reserve would seek to “break unions and empty factories.”¹³ The United States then embraced a finance-led regime whose history is now written in asset bubbles and their denouement: the dot.com bubble, the housing bubble, and as I write in spring, 2018, a new equities bubble seems to be emerging. My concern in this article, however, is with how labor adjusts to such a scheme.

Given this recent history, it is no wonder that scholars have turned to the questions of how to capture conceptually the manner in which people work under such conditions. *Immaterial? Redundant? Cognitive? Digital? Affective?* We have many terms from which to draw. I will understand *work* as a local action in which we all engage to make our lives both meaningful and possible, and *labor* as a coordinated social abstraction through which our work is organized.¹⁴ What I mean to capacitate with the term “decommodified labor” is a kind of work that is not compensated through a wage or available through a market purchase. Nor does decommodified labor primarily derive from or circulate through the intimate settings of family, care, and love, a kind of work increasingly recognized as

“affective labor.” It likewise bears little relation to the rather odd term “immaterial labor.”¹⁵

In this article, then, I want to make two claims. I want to suggest that decommodified labor provides both a terminology and methodology for thinking labor in our current conjuncture. Decommodified labor as I present it here seeks to account for increased wagelessness and patterns of economic stagnation after financialization, even as, once identified, it may be located throughout capitalist history. It is a term that articulates a present-ness of labor without making a claim of labor’s structural change. Rather, my argument for a decommodified labor follows my understanding that there is no new labor in capitalism.¹⁶ Labor has not become more or less *affective*, more or less *material*, more or less *cognitive*. We must see these concepts as moments of attempted periodization that, like periodization based on technological change, are staged at the wrong level of mediation. But labor may be more or less commodified, much as the organic composition of capital can and will change.¹⁷ I will argue that sites of labor must be transhistorical within a capitalist frame. A certain type of labor should be able to be located in multiple moments of capitalist history.

I proceed by exploring the history of decommodification as a potentially suitable concept for a Marxist political economy; I then suggest that “decommodified labor” in particular might help us to clarify how a certain form of labor becomes dominant in an era of real subsumption. Thus, I attempt to draw out a methodology for labor periodization. Finally, I offer a catalogue of locations where we find decommodified labor today—from the culture industry to academic peer review—as well as related but distinct sites of value extraction and compensation, from prison work to government disability payments, that might help us further delimit decommodified labor.

From Decommodification to Decommodified Labor

The larger concept of decommodification has been developed almost exclusively in political science and legal studies where it designates a certain independence from market forces. That independence, on a whole, is understood as a salve from whatever particular injuries an actor, or asset, might face were it to remain in the market. Karl Polanyi introduced the term to limn his famous double movement of capitalism under a process he described as the “embedding” and “disembedding” of market relations.¹⁸ If commodification denotes the sale of an object or process on the market, then decommodification implies the circumscription of that sale.¹⁹ Polanyi’s critique is staged at the level of the social and historical, but we may also see this duality at the scale of the individual.

It was Gösta Epsing-Anderson, however, whose book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* inaugurated the term in its current critical capacity with the claim that “the concept [of decommodification] refers to the degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable living independent of market participation.”²⁰ The “three worlds” of welfare capitalism outline the actual degree to which this independence is possible in capitalist democracies. Scandinavian countries circumscribe market forces in the provision of healthcare, education and housing most forcefully, thus their version of decommodification offers the most protection to their citizens from the caprices and deprivations of the market. The Anglo-sphere of England, Canada, Australia and New Zealand somewhat circumscribe the commodification of these provisions but offer a lesser degree of protection. And the United States permits the highest degree of commodification of basic services and thus its social sphere ensures the highest degree of precarity for those living in it. Epsing-Anderson, then, has developed the term as a concept appropriate to understand the freedoms and possibilities of labor within

capitalist welfare states. He presents the decommodification of labor as the situation in which “a service is rendered as a matter of right, and when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market.”²¹

Following Epsing-Anderson, Peter Frase has likewise explored the concept, noting its limits. He writes that “so long as the society remains a capitalist one, it is never possible for labor to be *totally* de-commodified, for in that circumstance there would be nothing to compel workers to go take a job working for someone else, and capital accumulation would grind to a halt.”²² Frase’s comment highlights the term’s limited scope: one who uses the term, decommodification, is in a sense noting that it in no way seeks to deliver us from a regime of commodification; rather, it is a limited response to that regime. Thus while introducing the basic concept of decommodification, these theorizations have the additional force of underscoring that commodification is the most fundamental physical, social and imaginative infrastructure of our present. Decommodification presumes commodification it does not presage it.

Decommodification, then, carries more modest ambitions than communization precisely because it recognizes the intransigence of commodification. But the term’s limitations may help to distinguish it from other associated terms such as the practice of “commoning” or the space of “the commons.” Once in a commons, uncompensated labor would no longer be decommodified—because the scene of commodification itself would not exist; there would be no labor but rather, as Marx calls, “really free working.”²³ But there is another worry about the scope of the term “the commons”: it carries with it a spatial designation. The commons is (was) a place. Labor claims a duration; “what the worker sells is time,” Harry Braverman reminds us.²⁴ We would not say that during Occupy Wall Street, Zuccotti Park was decommodified; we would say it was commoned. Conversely, Bruce Carruthers suggests that in the wake of the 2007–2008 credit crisis, the federal government “decommodified” many securities. This decommodification preserved their value but halted their circulation until the market could bear their exchange at stable prices.²⁵

While I note these explorations and uses of the idea of decommodification, my term “decommodified labor” departs from Epsing-Anderson in some significant fashion. Indeed, I invert his usage. For Epsing-Anderson, decommodification puts a limit on capitalist organization and its intensification as those processes transpire through commodification—the selling of an object made by wage labor on a market. In protecting certain forms of social need—housing, medicine, education—from commodity markets, sellers of labor power, i.e., all of us, are a bit more free in the choices we can and must make to socially reproduce ourselves. As I will use the term, however, *decommodified labor* suggests an intensification of the possibility of extraction from the labor relation.²⁶ Such intensification happens outside of the wage-labor market because *there is no wage*. Yet conversely, the process is still within the wage-labor market: we are still witnessing the ability of capital to extract surplus value from a situation of what we recognize as formal labor—going to work, clocking in, having a boss, and so on. With the term *decommodified labor*, I want to suggest a new configuration of value-extraction, in which the wage is diminished but the formal organization of work, its rhythms, commitments, and narratives remain. Scholars of liberalism, such as Frase and Epsing-Anderson, would suggest decommodification’s positive valence; I am not interested in making an ethical claim but rather a historical one. Like commodified labor, decommodified labor provides both freedoms and constraints.

Examples of decommodified labor abound, but perhaps readers of *Lateral* will appreciate one from the academy—itsself a leader in such job production. Southern Illinois University recently announced a new kind of position, what the university called a “volunteer

adjunct.”²⁷ In this scheme, recently minted PhDs could apply to work within the university from which they had just graduated; the position was for alumni. Once hired, they would undertake such tasks as graduate advising, committee work, and teaching; the position was part of the University’s Graduate Faculty. The positions would span three years, after which renewal would be possible. So one gets credentialed, one applies, one undertakes directed tasks for a bounded time period, one can then apply for renewal to extend that duration. This is a description of formal, highly skilled employment. But, importantly, this position carries no remuneration. Thus, the position is referred to by the university as “zero-time (adjunct) status,” since time and wage are coordinated and here, as the wage is zero, the time becomes zero.

How shall we categorize this type of employment? Is the labor performed in this position cognitive? Absolutely. Is it affective? How could it not be? Just imagine the production of feeling states as one returns to work without pay and shepherds other graduate students into a similarly, if not yet comprehended, unpaid future. Thus there is a subjective element as well: to undertake decommodified labor is always to be trained in being a decommodified laborer. Is it immaterial? Yes, but it is no doubt material, too. Let us think of the defining characteristic in this example. Certainly, it is the coincidence of formality and professionalism without remuneration. The labor maintains its commodity form and is exchanged without being sold. This situation renders labor decommodified. Let that be our example *par excellence* as we move forward.

Immediately, in its very terminology, “decommodified labor” may appear tautological. “Labor,” as opposed to work, already *is* a commodity; labor implies the incorporation of labor-power into capitalism. Why wouldn’t “decommodified labor” simply be labor power, that with which humans are endowed, before it is sold? Why route labor power through a commodity chain, only to then claim an exception to that chain? The answer to such questions is that with decommodified labor the commodity chain is still in place as are the presumptions of wage labor and the infrastructure of associated benefits and losses, but the wage itself is deemed incommensurate with the work. We see as much in the preceding example.

In the specific case of decommodified labor, the status of the commodity is preserved, but its circulation is halted and its possibility for its exchange is foreclosed. The duration of that foreclosure varies, as does its object. Sometimes the appearance of decommodified labor may be periodized historically by population. Child labor, for example, has been decommodified in most capitalist democracies for some time. It was for centuries an important source of both waged and unwaged labor. In the United States, since 1938, it has been illegal, and now very few children in the United States are workers.²⁸ Yet children still possess the ability to be laborers. Were restrictions on child labor lifted tomorrow, we would again have child workers.²⁹ Capitalist history is filled with examples of work-like actions as they drift in and out of commodified states. People themselves also drift in and out of commodified states in their specific role as workers. Actions may become commodified; they may likewise be decommodified. Often when that happens, however, we cease to consider the task work; likewise, we cease calling those undertaking the task workers.³⁰ Decommodified labor forces us to do otherwise.

These three brief examples that I have offered to introduce the concept show something of the breadth and diversity of both decommodification and its specificity when applied to labor. In the example of the securities, their decommodification interrupted their ability to circulate as a commodity in order to preserve their value and allow them to be reintroduced into a market at some future point. With the decommodification of children’s labor, a population’s ability to labor was suspended with the knowledge that those who occupy that class of laborers would themselves be elongated into a future in

which they would join the working world on new terms; the “teenager,” a quasi-adult capable of working but not voting, was a creation of this moment.³¹ And, finally, with the “volunteer adjunct” position, because the employer knows that there is no present or future market for academic labor, the employer can make a claim on decommodified labor *now*: work for us for free today, as tomorrow even the chance to work for free might prove elusive. As such, if the concept of *class* were to be invoked, it would need to be understood as fleeting and transient; we simply cannot compare the emergence and recession of decommodified laborers to a process of proletarianization.³²

Periodizing Decommodified Labor?

Following Jameson and Žižek, we now claim with some truth that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.³³ In the feudal era, of course, it was easier to imagine the end of the world than the beginning of capitalism. The substitution instructs us that as capitalism develops, it becomes history. When Marx declares that “all history is the history of class struggle” he makes an argument that *after* the arrival of capitalism, history itself cannot be imagined outside of its frame. This claim would be better said were it to distinguish narrative from history. All history is not the history of class struggle but capitalism’s logic of ceaseless and unbounded accumulation produces a narrative in which those features supersede of the frame of capitalism itself. Capitalists are imperialists no less in their imagination than in their control of space.

To periodize capitalism, then, requires us to distinguish the accumulation and representation of time on multiple levels; history as time, capital as time, labor as time, narrative as time. Yet each term produces and represents a different dimension of temporality. History organizes time as either casual sequence or lateral movement; capital is the result of time socialized and appropriated; labor is time given forward and paid backward; narrative is time-based meaning, read forward and comprehended in reverse.³⁴

As a mode of production, capitalism excels at producing narratives of critical change. Think of Walter Benjamin’s wonderful comment that “there has never been an epoch . . . [that] did not believe itself to be standing directly before an abyss.”³⁵ And yet, certain structural features of capitalism do not change. Capital extracts surplus value through the absorption and recreation of workers’ time—that constant cannot and will not change. And workers must be given something in exchange for their time. Workers may work more or less; they may work in fields or factories; they may be unionized or not; they may capture a greater or lesser percentage of the total surplus; they may have expanded or contracted add-ons such as health insurance, retirement, and so on. As with the work itself, the manner in which workers are compensated for the basic appropriation will be historically specific. The question in attempting to periodize the capital/labor relationship becomes on what terms do we analyze that specificity?

We might see one model in how scholars have used technology to periodize labor. Let us take the example of “digital labor,” as theorized by Christian Fuchs in an impressive body of scholarship.³⁶ Why do we need a theory of digital labor? Probably because few will deny that computerization, information technology in particular, has transformed the speed with which we communicate, produce and consume on a global scale. Fuchs suggests that his theory of digital labor explores, in part, the question: “where do computers, laptops and mobile phones come from and who produced them?”³⁷ He answers that “specific cases of digital labor . . . [include] the extraction of minerals in African mines under slave-like conditions; ICT [information communication technology] manufacturing and assemblage in China (Foxconn); software engineering in India; call-centre service work in the Philippines,” among others. How exactly do people work

digitally across such broad swaths of geography and varying levels of capitalist development? What unites these diversities in order to constitute digital labor?

We know whatever substance is perceived as the essence of digital labor must exceed what media companies have come to call “content,” that undifferentiated mass of commodified narratives and affects that we often ourselves produce; it must instead trespass upon, as Marx says of critique in an industrial age, “the door of production.”³⁸ Fuchs clarifies that digital labor “therefore does not only denote the production of digital content. It is a category that rather encompasses the whole mode of digital production, a network of agricultural, industrial and informational labor that enables the existence and use of digital media.”³⁹ Digital products require multiple sites and organizations of labor. And because digital production is so diverse, so must be its manner of compensation, or lack thereof. In a different article, but one that follows the global scope presented here, Fuchs notes that, “most digital relations of production are shaped by wage labor, slave labor, unpaid labor, precarious labor and freelance labor.”⁴⁰ Examining a broad range of digital laborers, Fuchs concludes that they are interconnected as workers because “they are all alienated in the sense that they do not own the products they produce.”⁴¹

What then ultimately distinguishes “digital labor?” Fuchs is hard pressed to say. How is it different from industrial labor? From agricultural labor? The manipulated objects are different, thus, the products produced are different. But it is unclear how that difference changes the basic form of labor itself. I would suggest digital labor is not a type of labor, but rather a manner of periodizing labor. I make a similar argument about affective labor in my forthcoming book, *Wages Against Artwork: Socially Engaged Art and the Decommodification of Labor*.⁴² To Fuchs’s credit, and unlike much biopolitical discourse, digital labor does maintain certain crucial aspects of labor as theorized by Marx. Namely, that labor partakes in a form of unequal exchange during which some aspect of the worker’s time will be appropriated as surplus value from the worker who will then need to compensate for that extraction by regenerating herself to be able to return to work. Yet to emphasize a historical break into a scene of digital (or immaterial labor or cognitive labor) is to proceed backwards, as it were. Assuming that there has been a change to labor’s structure, such theories then locate a proximal, often technological, and usually experience-based qualification of labor. We live in an age of computing, therefore labor has become *digital*. We live in an age of service provisions, therefore labor has become *affective*. We live in an age of the separation of mental and manual labor, therefore labor has become *cognitive*. And so on.

The model for such claims follows the kind of segmentation found in the history of technology: the age of industry, the networked age, the space age, etc. The objects that are selected to bookend such histories are themselves often problematic, as David Edgerton has shown in his wonderfully titled book, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History Since 1900*.⁴³ Why do we have “the space age” and not the “rickshaw age?” How did “the age of revolution” cede into “the age of industry?” We may locate other problems, too. Foremost, technology *is* labor. It is appropriated, socialized, and sedimented labor time—one aspect of “constant capital.” Once that collection becomes “technology” it takes on worryingly reifying characteristics of which the argument in Heidegger’s essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” may be understood as a symptom. An understanding of technology as labor reveals one of the reasons that exacting a technology-based qualification of labor is so trying: there’s a certain structural redundancy built in. Most simply, we must locate a level of abstraction other than technology to ground our periodization. Indeed, we must ask which aspects of labor should be periodized.

Decommodified labor itself does not constitute a historically new phenomenon; it has been realized before and it now is again available in our contemporary moment. Yet while we are quite accustomed to an analysis of how a task or object becomes a commodity, we are less used to a critique of how things cease to be a commodity. Nonetheless, we do have a repertoire of cognate terms on which to draw. For example, *deskilling* designates the devaluation of a certain task, and since any skill takes time to acquire, deskilling is also a reorganization of a worker's time and life possibilities. And as critics like Harry Braverman have argued, skilling, deskilling and reskilling reveal a dialectic unto themselves; historically they emerge and recede with new technologies. "Deindustrialization" meanwhile marks the devaluation of a certain place and its built environment. Deindustrialization is often positioned as local to the 1970s, and places such as Detroit and Manchester loom large in its imaginaries, but in fact deindustrialization has been a recurrent feature of urban life since the eighteenth century.⁴⁴ Such inflation and deflation of skill and place form the basis for Marx's ratio-based theory of the organic composition of capital.⁴⁵ Yet we do not currently have a term for the state in which our formal labor is devalued to the point of wagelessness while we are still doing it and this process too ebbs and flows through capitalist modernity.

But why, then, does decommodified labor become available for analysis now? We can locate its contemporary conditions of possibility in two different, albeit contiguous theorizations of economic history: the International Political Economy tradition (IPE) as well as the *operaismo* tradition. First, it must be noted, which Epsing-Anderson and other liberal understandings of the decommodification of labor as a salve from the ravages of the market do not, that what Martijn Konings and Leo Panitch call the "financial-imperial" architecture of the post 1973-American economy has enabled the emergence of decommodified labor now.⁴⁶ The United States' unique role as global debtor of last resort combined with the US dollar's global reach—the ability for dollar-denominated assets to increase in value throughout the world without the dollar inflating in price—sets the stage for decommodified labor to appear as it allows economic growth and wealth-storage to be decoupled from wages. Panitch and Konings argue that "in contrast to what happened with Britain [after its loss of hegemony], America's ability to accumulate gigantic amounts of debt was not compromised by the fact that its debts to the world came to far exceed its assets. This was precisely because America's debts became a central element of the infrastructure of the international financial system."⁴⁷

Secondly, we may suggest that decommodified labor may be understood as one experience of what scholars, primarily those influenced by Toni Negri, have called "real subsumption," following Marx's own "real subsumption of labor to capital." This construction captures a transformation of labor and is likewise traceable to theoretical flourishing in the 1970s as questions about the potential for class struggle and the limits of "the factory" emerged. Originally a concept Marx himself used to describe large-scale industrialization and mechanization, "real subsumption" has become somewhat of a metaphor for the ability of capitalism to progress, to intensify, to extract more and to encompass all. There is no "outside," here; capital has no other. Marx was more precise. He distinguishes formal and real subsumption as based on a move from relative to absolute surplus value. In a regime of absolute surplus value extraction, the working day can be extended to increase profit. But that increase has an end, obviously, and after its limit has been reached, a regime of relative surplus value extraction takes over. There, labor may be intensified through processes internal to capitalism.

For some interpreters, real subsumption is a historical category: first formal, then real. For others, it is a logical category: these two models of capitalist appropriation are always available and shift back and forth. I am partial to the latter claim. Regardless, with the real

subsumption of labor to capital, value extraction is hardly limited to waged work or financial schemes, and the subjects who might transform our social structures far exceed those found in unions, syndicates and so on. Labor, the value-generating result of the sale of human labor power as a commodity, is understood through the interpretation of real subsumption to have expanded and to refer to a whole host of human activities outside of formal places of work. As Jason Read explains in his wonderful reading of Negri, “capital no longer simply exploits labor, understood as the physical capacity to transform objects, but puts to work the capacities to create and communicate that traverse social relations . . . with real subsumption . . . there is no relationship that cannot be transformed into a commodity.”⁴⁸ Mario Tronti goes further: “the social character of production has been extended to the point that the entire society now functions as a mode of production.”⁴⁹ And finally, of course, we note Silvia Federici, Leopoldina Fortunati, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa. Each of these theorists has argued not only that capital seeks recourse to the informality of wagelessness for its reproduction, but that its sites for doing so, i.e., the home, are foundational to capital’s continuation.⁵⁰

On the one hand, we can’t stop working. All actions seem always-already incorporated into a scheme of surplus-value extraction. Theorizations of informal, home-based sites of reproduction as necessarily capitalized have been absolutely crucial in expanding our understanding of what it means to work. On the other hand, labor that is waged now appears in retreat. Formal labor has begun to adopt one of the chief characteristics of home-based work: its lack of remuneration. We can’t stop working and we can’t seem to get paid for the work that we do. And yet cultural critics have not yet developed a specification for the labor done in that moment. Hardt and Negri have rightly noted this contradiction: “This leads us to a paradox: in the same moment when theory no longer sees labor, labor has everywhere become the common substance. The theoretical emptying of the problem of labor corresponds to its maximum pregnancy as the substance of human action across the globe.”⁵¹

Their claim is provocative, but its abstract character disallows certain forms of analysis. At the same time, their own work itself has moved increasingly toward similarly abstract concepts, as seen in their concept of “immaterial value” or of “the multitude,” for example. Other scholars have sought to find more concrete sites at which this paradox of all-work/no-work appears. Jonathan Crary’s *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* might be the example *par excellence* of labor’s conceptual bleeding. He explores the same sleep humans have always slept, but now it has become surplus-value generating. Sleep has become the end-terrain of capital and state-craft. Pop an Ambien on the way in into it, anxiously dream of a collegial Facebook posting gone awry, wake up reaching for an iPhone, at 3:10 am.⁵² This is certainly an example of something, but I’m not sure of what. Indeed, the vagueness of the relationship to labor indicates the problem.

If there is no relationship that cannot be transformed into a commodity, then we must add that there is no relationship that cannot be decommodified. Decommodified labor introduces the notion of an accumulative pause and retreat (for the worker, of course) that terms like spatial fix and uneven development seek to locate at a larger scale of analysis. Decommodified labor returns us to the discreteness and formality of bounded employment, now with the benefit of theorizations including Negri’s and Federici’s as a guide. It carves out of the porousness of real subsumption a new site of difference, and it reincorporates that difference into formal work to produce a kind of combined and uneven employment.

Combined and Uneven Employment: Locating Decommodified Labor Now

In addition to theorizing decommodified labor, to periodizing it, we must be able to locate it. Here we are not concerned with simple wagelessness. Rather we are concerned to identify the location of formal, value-generating work that is not waged. With decommodified labor: the work is still the work, the job is still the job, the rules still apply, but the wage has disappeared. Cuba still uses the phrase “volunteer labor” to refer to civic and community tasks that are encouraged and indeed necessary but nonetheless carried out beyond the limits of formal employment and compensation. In the United States, however, we have different idioms to choose from: volunteerism, community service, internship, even “research.” Each resonates with, and indeed exemplifies, some crucial element of decommodified labor. Benanav rightly notes that “while it is easy to identify the middle or lower levels of the set of surplus workers, it much more difficult to identify its upper levels.”⁵³ One reason for such difficulty, as George Caffentzis has suggested, is that “unwaged work [offers] the appearance of personal choice.”⁵⁴

We might delineate four discrete areas in which decommodified labor appears today: the culture industry, civic organization, internships, and education, including the academy. It is important to my argument that these identifications of decommodified labor are not organized around a technology. Indeed, we see varying degrees of the use of technology in the examples I will present, but none of them rely on technology for their definition. Likewise, none of them rely on “affect” as an over-determining feature. Of course each of them make use of forms of technology and affect—as does all labor; that is quite simply what it means for labor to be, in Marx’s words, “uniquely human.” These examples are not meant to be exhaustive. I hope to begin rather than end a conversation.

The Culture Industry

Inherited from the Frankfurt School, the conglomerate notion of “the culture industry” is indeed a capacious concept, ranging from professional sports to music, from art production to film and television, to now, of course, to the world of social media. What each of these specific cultural forms has in common is a structural underpinning of decommodified labor; I will focus only on a few. Sometimes that underpinning is thematized in the cultural form itself: think of reality television, which both dramatizes and is produced by decommodified labor. The communications scholar Tanner Mirrlees notes that: “reality TV companies keep production costs to a minimum by exploiting the non-waged labour of anybody who want . . . to become a reality TV celebrity. For most of TV’s history, TV studios hired and paid for the labor of professional actors, many of which were unionized . . . [lack of wages] decreases the number of paid jobs for TV.”⁵⁵ Likewise, Mark Andrejevic has argued that such television essentially produces a site of spectral labor, what he calls “the work of being watched,” in his book of the same name.⁵⁶ What I would add to this communications-based overview is that the viewing public enjoys watching unpaid people as they struggle to find remuneration after the wage because it mirrors their own experiences. Indeed, reality television—everyone working, no one really working—both resonates with and renders normative the decommodified working life of many.

Other times, however, the decommodified labor that subtends the cultural form is obfuscated by the cultural product. Think of professional sports, which very much is organized around an idea of globalized, fair capitalist competition with spectacular wealth as the hard-earned result of winning. The sports industry includes in its moneymaking model the non-remuneration of much of its labor force. Professional golf has led the way, with tennis, football, and basketball each following. In 2012, *Forbes* invoked an oddly Marxist terminology in its article “The PGA Tour’s Secret Army,” in which a reporter spent several weeks as a Professional Golf Association (PGA) tournament volunteer, mostly parking cars and doing laundry. One of the most profitable sporting associations (like the

NFL and USTA, it is also a non-profit—its own irony⁵⁷), *Forbes* notes that golf's earnings come from "ticket sales, pro-am events and concessions, but the real financial secret sauce is free labor: Nearly everyone you see working at a PGA Tour event is a volunteer, many toiling long hours and seeing very little, if any, actual golf."⁵⁸ These volunteer activities are regulated. One has to purchase a uniform; show up on time; follow the rules and so on. What happens if one is late or missing one's uniform or watching golf instead of doing laundry? According to one professional tennis tournament—proudly run almost exclusively through volunteers—failure to follow the rules will result in "termination."⁵⁹ This, then, is a relationship of employer to employee.

Civic Work

In the mid-1970s, at the height of New York City's fiscal crisis, with hospitals slated to close, police officers and firefighters being laid off by the thousands, and no help forthcoming from the Federal Government, the city came up with a novel idea: get people to work in government jobs without pay. Senator Jacob Javits initiated the Citizens Committee for New York City in hopes of "recruiting 10,000 volunteers to staff public libraries and health clinics, to form auxiliary police squads and clean sidewalks."⁶⁰ "Citizen Group Suggests Volunteers Be Used to Fill Gaps in City Services," ran an article headline in *The New York Times* on December 2, 1975. The Fiscal Crisis ended, but the services were not restored. Indeed, the Citizens Committee remains active today, stepping in with volunteer efforts and corporate funding to make up for still-absent services; on its board of directors sit the heads of financial firms that were both the protagonists in and beneficiaries of the fiscal crisis in the first place.

By the mid-1990s, Andrew Greely could report in the *American Prospect* that "over the past decade something astonishing has happened. The rate of volunteering is higher [in the United States] than anywhere else in the world."⁶¹ Americans indeed volunteer for work crucial to collective life including firefighting and emergency medical rescue, the staffing of hospitals, and the running of schools—think of all the PTA, or parent teacher association, meetings. What happens in other capitalist democracies? Often, people are paid to do these tasks. Their labor is commodified. Finally, it is worth noting that, in the United States, while the giving of money to charity is often itself a money-making venture because of the tax deduction it carries, the giving of *time* through volunteer labor is not granted the same fiscal incentive. Here we see how decommodified labor participates in the same structural weakness viz. its relation to capital as does commodified labor.

The civic constitutes a peculiar category within both Marxism and liberalism. Older theories of the division between productive and non-productive labor would argue that the civic dwells outside the scope of surplus-value production.⁶² But the civic also locates a peculiar lacuna in liberal theories of the state. If the project of liberalism is to disavow the economy as constitutive of the liberal political frame itself, then the civic becomes a crucial site for the symptomatic theorization of state-building activity as a form of non-work, as a non-economic activity. In the research of sociologists such as Elisabeth S. Clemens and Theda Skocpol, we may recognize how decommodified labor as civic undertaking has been both introduced and catalogued but rendered extra-economic because of its lack of wage. Clemens formulates a "three-sector model" of social organization composed of "state, market, [and] voluntary sphere."⁶³ Skocpol claims that the Federalist structure of the United States has "encouraged a process of what I call 'competitive emulation,' in which people from one state vied with those in other states to see who could do a better and faster job of spreading the shared associational undertaking" of nation building.⁶⁴ In both examples we see civic work theorized as non-

economic (even though it is competitive!) because it is oriented toward the state and not the wage.

Universities

Readers of *Lateral* will be unsurprised to see this category: from uncompensated student work, to uncompensated peer-faculty work (editing, reviewing, publishing, particularly for adjuncts and others not on salary), to the turning over of such documents as dissertations to for-profit companies (Wiley and Springer, for example) without compensation as a condition of graduation, to, now, “volunteer adjuncts,” universities have long been leaders in the field of decommodified labor. Scholars such as Randy Martin, Marc Bousquet, and Chris Newfield have all done exceptional research on the structural aspects of universities’ labor and finance practices; here I simply want to note a congruence with my contention of decommodified labor.⁶⁵

Such decommodified labor spans the academic disciplines. The journal *Nature* recently ran an article entitled, “Unpaid Research Jobs Draw Criticism” and noted that “the practice of using free labour to do field work” has increased substantially over the past fifteen years to the point where some scientific researchers pay their own travel, accommodations and so on while doing fieldwork without compensation.⁶⁶ At the same time as decommodified labor expands into full-fledged “research jobs,” it also moves into more menial academic positions. Teaching assistantships, once the province of graduate students—themselves often consigned to the feudal role of “apprentice”—are now increasingly staffed by undergraduates who work without pay and, in the most extravagant cases, pay to work. In its college advice section—the article’s placement in such a prominent publication alerts us to how widespread the practice is—*USA Today* explains that: “Unlike graduate TAs, undergraduate TAs are not always paid. Instead, undergraduate TAs sometimes receive class credit—and a grade—for their effort. . . . Serving as a TA involves ample time and effort. If you cannot afford to give up this time and effort without monetary compensation (i.e. you believe your time may be better spent working a job for which you will be paid), you may want to decline the offer.”⁶⁷

Internships

The internship, of course, is what many people will first think of when presented with the concept of decommodified labor. And, it is true, internship histrionics have their own history of spectacular exploitation. Think of Ivanka Trump, for example, tweeting advice about “how to survive an unpaid internship in New York City” at her own company.⁶⁸ It was not until 2011 that the first book-length study of this new category of work emerged with Ross Perlin’s *Intern Nation*.⁶⁹ Perlin notes that of the “approximately 9.5 million [undergraduates]—a large majority, perhaps as many as 75 percent, undertake at least one internship before they graduate,” what he calls a “striking and novel development.” He goes on to explain that: internships are changing the nature of work and education in America . . . [becoming] the principal point of entry for young people into the white-collar world.” Because in some states, including New York, for profit companies are prohibited from offering unpaid internships, Perlin notes that “a significant number of these situations are . . . illegal under U.S. law.” (As was Trump’s.)

But it is the “non-profit” sector, including the Federal government, which excels in recruiting and administering the decommodified labor of interns to the point that economists have wondered to what extent wage rates in Washington DC are in fact depressed as a result—a kind of reverse multiplier effect. And, of course, once wages are withheld, many other forms of non-payment follow: social security tax, Medicare, pay-roll

tax and so on. The proliferation of decommodified labor suggests not simply an evacuation of the personal wage, but of the social wage as well.⁷⁰

Prisons

Prisons represent an ambiguous category for the location of decommodified labor. Labor, as we know, is “free” labor and within labor’s illusory freedom various sites of constraint circumscribe the life of the worker. In prison, however, inmates are often forced to work without pay. At that point, we are no longer speaking of decommodified labor because we are out of the realm of labor *per se*.⁷¹ Indeed, in such a case we might better speak of indentured servitude or forms of neo-capitalist slavery, as many scholars have argued.⁷² That does not mean such labor is not part of capitalism, or that it is not productive; we need not return to those debates of the 1960s and 70s about whether slavery was capitalistic.⁷³ Instead, we should note that the wage renders the non-wage productive, and vice versa. As Marx himself says: “Capital . . . is not only . . . the command over labour. It is essentially the command over unpaid labour.”⁷⁴ He consequently affirms that “the secret of the self-expansion of capital resolves itself into having the disposal of a definite quantity of other people’s unpaid labour.”⁷⁵

Indeed, the expansion of prison as a reactionary racist force throughout the 1970s and 80s, as Jordan Camp has argued, is part of the same crisis of the Keynesian state as is the decommodified labor I have attempted to define throughout this article.⁷⁶ But prison labor denotes an interstice in which labor cedes into something else; it represents the limit of the wage. In a similar limit case, *The Washington Post* notes that in majority white populations throughout the US south, many are paid not to work through disability schemes. “Between 1996 and 2015, the number of working-age adults receiving disability climbed from 7.7 million to 13 million. The federal government [spends more on disability payments] than the combined total for food stamps, welfare, housing subsidies and unemployment assistance.”⁷⁷ Finally, the *Post* highlights the racial character of disability payments by specifying such payments as “a force that has reshaped scores of mostly white, almost exclusively rural communities, where as many as one-third of working-age adults live on monthly disability checks.” As with not getting paid, or getting paid a pittance, for prison work, getting paid for “disability” represents the limits of the wage form and not necessarily a site for the identification of decommodified labor. Thus, I disagree with Peter Frase who suggests that “insofar as there are programs like unemployment protection, socialized medicine, and guaranteed income security in retirement—and insofar as eligibility for these programs is close to universal—we can say that labor has been partially de-commodified.”⁷⁸

What, finally, does this section of my article offer examples of? As a regime of relative surplus value and real subsumption is established, labor becomes a ghostly repetition of itself. In these examples, we see the local and proximal form such labor takes. The appropriate and necessary term for this state of affairs is *decommodified labor*. Using his own distinction between wealth and value, Moishe Postone concludes *Time, Labor and Social Domination* with this remarkable claim: “As capitalist industrial production . . . [develops], proletarian labor becomes increasingly superfluous from the standpoint of the production of material wealth, hence, ultimately anachronistic; yet it remains necessary as the source of value . . . [T]he more developed capital becomes, the more it renders the very labor it requires for its constitution empty and fragmented.”⁷⁹ This describes our moment of labor’s truth.





Conclusion

Why is decommodified labor something in need of new conceptual differentiation? Why is it not a reapplication of the kind of care work and other feminized and racialized forms of devalued labor on which capitalism has long—like, always—depended? Or does decommodified labor have at its root the kind of potentially metaphorical reach that “real subsumption” has turned out to have? Could we understand it in a spatial language of inside/outside, a kind of Deleuzian fold in the field of the wage? These questions seem to me to offer some real criticisms of my argument.

In response, I would suggest that decommodified labor might help us specify and better understand how aspects of care work and housework have been absorbed and reconfigured in formal employment. Indeed, decommodified labor may help us to recognize how regimes of surplus value accumulation are reflected in the basic sale of the labor commodity itself. I would further proffer that keeping the question of labor within the realm of the commodity form provides surer theoretical footing on which to stand when attempting to make a claim on labor’s present than does appealing to technology— itself a form of socialized labor. Such technology-based periodizing might alert us to labor’s discourses or to workers’ experience of labor, but it will not lead us to an understanding of labor’s structural relationship to capital. Indeed, it might obfuscate that relationship through the very language of novelty and transformation that has been a fundamental accompaniment to modern discourses on technology.

In surveying capitalism’s history, we can see that it has always relied on decommodified labor to pace, interrupt, disorganize and render profitable commodified labor. Much as it has always relied on deskilling. And deindustrialization. Value as a social process necessarily contains within it the possibility of devaluation. I have tried to delimit a moment in which this process becomes perceptible within labor. By placing that process within formal places of work, I have tried to show how truly expansive it may become. Decommodified labor is not new, but then, neither is affect, neither is mentality, neither is cognition. Indeed, “digitality” itself is now being theorized “without computers” perhaps a precursor to showing its *longue durée* as well.⁸⁰

Notes

1. This post is from the film industry job website, Mandy.com. “If you search Mandy.com for the phrase “payment is on an unpaid basis,” you’ll find dozens upon dozens of opportunities to work as a film editor or a production assistant or even a puppet master where all that’s offered is the ability to add a credit to one’s IMDB page and maybe get a complimentary DVD of the production.” Charles Davis, “Payment is on an Unpaid Basis,” *The Baffler*, October 1, 2014, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/payment-unpaid-basis>. 
2. Fredric Jameson, *Value: The Representation of Labor* (London: Verso, 2011). 
3. Bethany Moreton, “The Future of Work: The Rise and Fall of the Job,” *Pacific Standard*, October 22, 2015, <https://psmag.com/economics/the-future-of-work-the-rise-and-fall-of-the-job>. Michael Denning, “Wageless Life,” *New Left Review* 66 (November-December 2010). Also of note, throughout the 1990s, there were predictions of “the end of work,” whose causality was located in technology. See, for example, Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, *The Jobless Future* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). 
4. Lauren Weber, “The End of Employees,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-end-of-employees-1486050443>; <http://fortune.com/2011/03/25/unpaid-jobs-the-new-normal/>. 
5. For the class-based cruelty of reality television, see Anna McCarthy “Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theatre of Suffering,” *Social Text* 93, 25, no. 4 (Winter 2007).

For reality television as a leader in unpaid labor, see Tanner Mirrlees, “Reality TV’s Low-Wage and No-Wage Work,” *Alternate Routes* 27 (2016): 187–212. I will examine reality television later in this essay. ↗

6. Jordan Sargent, “Urban Outfitters’ Fall Strategy: Asking Employees To Work For Free,” *Gawker*, October 7, 2015, <http://gawker.com/urban-outfitters-fall-strategy-asking-employees-to-wor-1735228986>. ↗
7. See *Girls*, Season 1, episode 3, “All Adventurous Women Do,” dir. Lena Dunham, HBO, April 29, 2012. ↗
8. This bulky but useful phrase is from Stewart Martin, “The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity,” *Radical Philosophy*, 146 (December/November 2007): 15–25, 17. ↗
9. Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence* (New York: Verso, 2006), xxviii. ↗
10. See Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2017). ↗
11. See the fascinating dissertation by Aaron Benanav, *A Global History of Unemployment* (UCLA, 2015), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7r14v2bq#>: “Since 1950, 3 factors have made it possible to tell a global history of unemployment: 1—a massive increase in the world’s population, the working population in particular; 2—a green revolution which significantly reduced the price of food, but also resulted in a worldwide wave of agricultural exit; 3—global wave of deindustrialization” (3). ↗
12. We are reminded of Ernest Mandel’s great comment: “Keynes’ classic answer to his critics {was}: ‘in the long-run we are all dead.’ It was an outlook of a class condemned by history.” Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1975), 415, note 23. ↗
13. See Leigh Claire La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4. ↗
14. This division is different from Marx’s own division of labor power, a potential that we all have, and labor, that which is ultimately sold in exchange and used to produce surplus value. ↗
15. The genealogy of the emergence of “affective labor” is impressive. See, for example, Patricia Clough, ed., *The Affective Turn* (Durham: Duke, 2007); see also Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000), for their cognate term “immaterial labor.” In Michael Palm, *Technologies of Consumer Labor: A History of Self-Service* (New York: Routledge, 2016), Palm introduces the helpful term “consumer labor.” He notes that it was precisely during the post-war boom—that untouchable bastion of American labor history, its “golden age”—that “self-service” as a form of what he calls “consumer labor,” appears. Palm’s is a helpful and important term; I would suggest consumer labor is a subset, not only of domestic labor, as he suggests, but of decommodified labor as well. ↗
16. I am indebted to Moishe Postone’s interpretation of Marx’s labor theory of value in *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), wherein labor itself is a socially produced form of abstract domination. I return to it throughout this article. ↗
17. Rather it moves between sites of its own abstract and concrete potentialities. In its concrete dimension, the daily activities of social reproduction are value producing. But this is possible only because they are necessarily abstract, too. ↗
18. See Karl Polanyi’s “double movement” of capital as theorized in *The Great Transformation* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1944); Giovanni Arrighi interprets the same problem as a spatialization of MCM’ in *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1994); for something totally different see David Graeber on alternating cycles of

credit money vs. specie money in *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2012). [↗](#)

19. See also, Gareth Dale, “Social Democracy, Embeddedness and Decommodification: On the Conceptual Innovations and Intellectual Affiliations of Karl Polanyi,” *New Political Economy* 15: 369–393. [↗](#)
20. Gosta Epsing-Anderson, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990). [↗](#)
21. Epsing-Anderson, *The Three Worlds*, 22. [↗](#)
22. Peter Frase, “Decommodification in Everyday Life,” July 7, 2011, <http://www.peterfrase.com/2011/06/de-commodification-in-everyday-life/>. [↗](#)
23. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 159. [↗](#)
24. Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Labor in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 117. [↗](#)
25. Bruce G. Carruthers, “Financial Decommodification: Risk and the Politics of Valuation in U.S. Banks,” May 2014, http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/2/files/2013/10/carruthers_final_1_22.pdf [↗](#)
26. Doing so allows me to avoid the problems that Melinda Cooper has astutely noted; she writes “in general, leftist demands for the decommodification of social life or the protection of kinship relations all too readily lend themselves to the social conservative argument that certain forms of (domestic, feminized) labor should remain unpaid.” Melinda Cooper, *Family Values* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2017), 23. [↗](#)
27. Nell Gluckman, “Want to Be a ‘Volunteer Adjunct’? Southern Illinois U. Is Hiring,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Want-to-Be-a-Volunteer/243221>. John Warner, “Volunteer Faculty: The Death Knell for Public Higher Ed,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/volunteer-faculty-death-knell-public-higher-ed>. [↗](#)
28. The key text here is Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985). Zelizer notes that children were essentially forced out of work by new, and newly white, immigrants in the 1920s. [↗](#)
29. In many countries—most, no doubt—children are waged workers. For a recent consideration of children as workers, see “In Bolivia, Legitimizing Child Labor,” *The New York Times*, online video, December 19, 2015. [↗](#)
30. See the international Wages for Housework movement and Silvia Federici’s even more apt essay “Wages Against Housework,” in Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), which contains a reprint of the essay with Federici’s retrospections. More recently, see See Tithi Bhattacharya’s edited collection, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto, 2017). [↗](#)
31. See Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), chapter 2. [↗](#)
32. What we also see here is that decommodified labor does not produce a class-based configuration of workers as they engage with and are metabolized by capital, but a kind of momentary emergence, sharing a certainly similarity with post-structuralist approaches to Marx. [↗](#)
33. They famously each attribute the phrase to the other. [↗](#)
34. Moishe Postone explains this dynamic applies at a narrative level to the process of reading *Capital Vol. I*. The reading practice is synecdochal for the historical practice:

“What seems to be historical unfolding is actually a progression backwards . . . based on a logical reconstruction of the dynamic character of capitalism . . . only when it is developed.” Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, 285. ↗

35. The full quotation reads, “There has never been an epoch that did not feel itself to be ‘modern’ in the sense of eccentric, and did not believe itself to be standing directly before an abyss. The desperately clear consciousness of being in the middle of a crisis is something chronic in humanity.” Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982) 677. ↗
36. See for example, Christian Fuchs, *Reading Marx in the Information Age: A Media and Communication Studies Perspective on Capital Volume 1* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Christian Fuchs, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Christian Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2014) ↗
37. Christian Fuchs, “Digital Labor and Imperialism” *Monthly Review* 67, no. 8 (January 2016), <https://monthlyreview.org/2016/01/01/digital-labor-and-imperialism/>. ↗
38. Christian Fuchs, “Theorising and Analysing Digital Labour: From Global Value Chains to Modes of Production,” *The Political Economy of Communication* 1, no. 2 (2013). ↗
39. Fuchs, “Digital Labor.” ↗
40. Fuchs, “Theorising and Analysing.” ↗
41. Fuchs, “Theorising and Analysing.” ↗
42. Leigh Claire La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork: Socially Engaged Art and Decommodified Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019). ↗
43. See David Edgerton for a nice overview of the problems with such technological history: *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History Since 1900* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007). ↗
44. For deskilling in labor, see Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); for a necessary recent take on deindustrialization, see Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton* (New York: Penguin, 2014). ↗
45. “The difference between the technical composition and the value composition is manifested in each branch of industry in that the value-relation of the two portions of capital may vary while the technical composition is constant, and the value-relation may remain the same while the technical composition varies. . . . The value-composition of capital, inasmuch as it is determined by, and reflects, its technical composition, is called the organic composition of capital.” Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, Chapter 8, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch08.htm>. ↗
46. For a wonderful overview, see Martijn Konings and Leo Panitch’s collection *American Empire and the Political Economy of Global Finance* (New York: Palgrave, 2008). ↗
47. *Ibid.* p. 47. ↗
48. Jason Read, “A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity,” *Foucault Studies* 6 (2009): 25–36; 29. ↗
49. Mario Tronti, “Social Capital, or, *Il piano del capitale*,” *Zerowork*, Supplemental (Historical) Materials, <http://www.zerowork.org/TrontiSocialCapital.htm>. This translation of Tronti was first published in *Telos* 17 (Fall 1973): 98–121, and the original, “Il Piano del capitale,” was published in *Quaderni Rossi* 3 (1963): 44–73, and reprinted in Mario Tronti, *Operaie Capitale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966, 1971), 267–311. ↗
50. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004). ↗

51. Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, *The Labor of Dionysus* (Minneapolis: UM Press, 1991), 11. [↗](#)
52. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: The Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013). [↗](#)
53. Benanav, *Global History of Unemployment*, 15. [↗](#)
54. George Caffentzis, "Throwing Away The Ladder: The Universities In The Crisis," *Zerowork* 1, December 1975, <http://zerowork.org/CaffentzisThrowingAway.html>, accessed July 2017. [↗](#)
55. See Mirrlees, "'Reality TV's,'" 191. [↗](#)
56. Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Rowman and Littlefield: 2003). [↗](#)
57. With over 80 percent of nonprofits utilizing volunteers, about 6.5 percent of the entire US population (15 million people) was volunteering on an average day in 2006 –hours that would otherwise require the equivalent of 7.6 million full-time employees and \$66 billion in wages at the absolute least (using the 2006 federal minimum wage)." Ross Perlin, *Intern Nation* (New York: Verso, 2013), 123. [↗](#)
58. Michael Noer, "The PGA Tour's Secret Army," *Forbes*, August 2, 2011, www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnoer/2012/08/02/the-pga-tours-secret-army/. [↗](#)
59. Cincinnati Masters, Volunteer Guide, available online at http://www.wsopen.com/Volunteers/all_volunteers/, accessed May 3, 2018. [↗](#)
60. This history is from Kim Phillips Fein, *Fear City* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017), 218. [↗](#)
61. Andrew Greely, "The Tocqueville Files," *American Prospect* (May/June 1997), archived at http://prospect.org/archive?field_issue_date_value%5Bvalue%5D%5Byear%5D=1997. [↗](#)
62. See Ian Gough, "Marx's Theory of Productive and Unproductive Labor," *New Left Review* 76 (November/December 1972), for a critique and undoing of this division. [↗](#)
63. See Elisabeth S. Clemens and Doug Guthrie, eds., *Politics and Partnerships: The Role of Voluntary Associations in America's Political Past and Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3. [↗](#)
64. Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 93. [↗](#)
65. See Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works* (New York: NYU Press, 2008); Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008); Randy Martin, *Under New Management* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2011). [↗](#)
66. Chris Woolston, "Unpaid Research Jobs Draw Criticism," *Nature*, June, 2 2015, <http://www.nature.com/news/unpaid-research-jobs-draw-criticism-1.17697>. [↗](#)
67. Varsity Tutors, "Should you be an undergraduate TA?" *USA Today*, June 30, 2015, <http://college.usatoday.com/2015/06/30/should-you-be-an-undergraduate-ta/>. [↗](#)
68. "Ivanka Trump's Advice to Unpaid Interns Sparks Backlash," Twitter Moments, August 19, 2016, <https://twitter.com/i/moments/766748172601352192>. [↗](#)
69. Ross Perlin, *Intern Nation* (New York: Verso, 2013). [↗](#)

70. Perlin provides many statistics in his book to document the increase of such labor, as do websites such as independentsector.org, which keeps a running tab of “volunteer time,” expended in the United States as well as its estimated value. Such documentation is necessary but not sufficient for taking note of decommodified labor. [↗](#)
71. United States employment law reflects these contradictions: Section 26 U.S.C. 3306(c)(21) of the tax code states that any service performed in a penal institution isn’t considered employment. [↗](#)
72. The classic study here is, of course, Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag* (Berkeley: California UP, 2006). [↗](#)
73. For the long discussion of whether or how slavery should be considered capitalist in terms of the debate’s impressive historiography, see Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000). [↗](#)
74. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 376–7. [↗](#)
75. *Ibid.* [↗](#)
76. See Jordan T. Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2016). [↗](#)
77. Terrence McCoy, “Disabled or Just Desperate?” *The Washington Post*, March 30, 2017, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/local/2017/03/30/disabled-or-just-desperate/> [↗](#)
78. Frase, “Decommodification.” [↗](#)
79. Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 356. [↗](#)
80. See Seb Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (Cambridge: MIT UP, 2015), chapter 1. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



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